

HOW SYNTHETIC EXPERIENCE SHAPES SOCIAL REALITY

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Editor's Note

Media are often credited with the power to bring the world's major events into the living rooms of average Americans. G. Ray Funkhouser and Eugene F. Shaw warn that this is a dangerous illusion. The media do not mirror reality. Instead, they expose audiences to synthetic realities fashioned in ways that meet the media's needs. Media images present distorted views of the world that raise false expectations and generate social discontent and undesirable behaviors. The authors concede that it is difficult to prove causal linkages between the audience attitudes and behaviors that they decry and media images. Nonetheless, they contend that the evidence of media influence is persuasive.

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... Numerous authors in contemporary culture (e.g., 1, 2, 4, 12, 14, 15, 17) have commented on the ability of the media to shape portrayals of reality in ways that may in turn shape audience perceptions of *content*. This article explores another dimension of how media shape reality: Ubiquitous electric (motion picture) and electronic (television and computers) media manipulate and rearrange not only the content but the *processes* of communicated experience, thereby shaping how the audience perceives and interprets the

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physical and social reality depicted. We suggest that the sight/sound media accomplish this by operating (as Plato might say) at yet a *fourth* remove from reality, providing their audiences with "synthetic experience."

Throughout recorded history, the content of communications has been used to produce intended effects in audience opinion, attitudes, and behavior, for example by political manipulators who stage pageants or ritual displays of authority (e.g., 8, 10). But political discourse has never occupied a major portion of humanity's waking hours. The pervasiveness of electronic media today means that their effects may go far beyond shaping opinion or perceptions concerning specific issues, figures, or regimes, to the point of coloring entire cultural world views. . . .

The issue of the representation of reality thus has achieved new and important dimensions in twentieth-century Western culture. As Zettl (20, p. 9) suggests, "the surgeon who cuts into human beings with his scalpel, and we, who cut into human beings with highly charged, keenly calculated aesthetic energy, have an equally grave responsibility toward them." In this article we argue that synthetic experience represents a distortion of reality that poses serious consequences for the media audience and for society in general. . . .

Until the nineteenth century, for most people actual experience was limited to events occurring within the "natural sensory envelope"—the limits of the human nervous system to detect physical stimuli, governed by natural, physical processes. The development of symbolic communication—first of language and drawings, then writing, then printing—had permitted access to information without firsthand experience. Individuals thus could get word of events that occurred outside their sensory envelope, but this constituted symbolic information, not experience.

Within little more than one hundred years, beginning with steam locomotion, internal combustion, and electricity in the nineteenth century and continuing by the turn of the century with electric media (telegraph, telephone, and phonograph) and then motion pictures, radio, and television, technological developments created a quite different perceptual world from that in which human perceptual capabilities and the social institutions of Western civilization had evolved. Twentieth-century communication innovations—namely motion pictures, television, and computers and their allied technologies—differ crucially from all previous media and forms of communication. Introduced into one's sensory envelope, they appear to extend it beyond its natural limits. Unlike speech, writing, drawing, painting, and even photography, they let mass audiences perceive, as quasi-eyewitnesses, events that happened in other times or in other places, or that never really happened at all. These kinetic media possess an immediacy of experience not essentially different from viewing life through a one-way mirror. Moreover,

they are accepted and credible; audiences tend to believe what they see on television (16).

Modern cinematic and data-manipulating techniques have made it possible to experience even "real events" in new ways. Altheide (1) notes:

All mediated experience is different from what we would experience if we encountered the phenomenon first hand. This is due to the peculiar nature of an activity or event and the meaningful connection it has to those who are directly perceiving it; however, it is also due to the way the electronic media operate. The mass media are able to transform events occurring in one time and place into another time and place by employing formats (p. 19).

We wish to extend this line of reasoning to broader aspects of modern media and their impact on society, and to go beyond the abilities of the media to transform the nature of events through "formats." The following techniques, frequently used not only in commercials and entertainment but also in news and documentaries, are now commonplace to film and television audiences (whether or not every member actually is conscious of them):

- altered speeds of movement, either slow or fast motion
- reenactments of the same action (instant replay)
- instantaneous cutting from one scene to another
- excerpting fragments of events
- juxtaposing events widely separated by time or space
- shifting points of view, via moving cameras, zoom lenses, or multiple cameras
- combined sight from one source and sound from another (e.g., background music, sound effects, dubbed dialogue)
- merging, altering, or distorting visual images, particularly through computer graphics techniques and multiple-exposure processing
- manufacturing "events" through animation or computer graphics

Computers have vastly extended these capabilities, enabling media producers to easily (if expensively) create visual images and effects, alter photographic depictions, and merge, excerpt, and modify sight and/or sound into depictions with little or no connection to events that ever occurred—or even could occur—in reality (see, e.g., 19). Thus, as we become more dependent on electronic media for information and entertainment, our information environment is permeated not only with synthetic events but also with synthetic experience.

We contend that synthetic experience is qualitatively different from real experience. A "real experience," as we define it, physically originates within a person's natural sensory envelope—continuous sight, sound, smell, etc., arising from events occurring at their own paces in real time within the reach of the person's sensory capabilities. "Synthetic experience" results from perceptions that could not possibly originate within any person's natural sensory envelope. Prior to the age of electricity only real experience was possible. However, during the twentieth century the public has become accustomed to an information environment of real experience intermixed with absolutely unreal, synthetic experience. Postman (15), p. 79, notes: "There is no more disturbing consequence of the electronic and graphic revolution than this: that the world as given to us through television seems natural, not bizarre."

Motion pictures provide synthetic experience, but even in their heyday they occupied at most several hours per week of an individual's time, and people self-consciously attended them as a recreational event. Television has become routine in the typical U.S. home, where it is estimated to be on for more than six hours a day (18). To that we must add time spent viewing videocassettes and using other electronic media at home and elsewhere. Watching a television broadcast or a movie is, of course, a "real experience" in that it takes place within one's natural sensory envelope. But the crucial distinction is whether the media-depicted events are mistakenly perceived *and stored* as real experience, rather than as authentic experiences of viewing unreal depictions that, in Plato's words, have as an antidote the knowledge of the situation's true nature.

The average child in the United States today is estimated to have spent more time in front of a television set than behind a school desk by the time he or she reaches maturity (see 13). Again, the issue is, are these television-derived perceptions erroneously interpreted and stored by the child as real experiences? Is the stored map of the world that the child constructs a compilation of the child's actual experiences in the real world? Or is that picture being systemically blurred by synthetic experiences delivered through electronic media?

Both real and synthetic events are increasingly presented to mass media audiences in the form of synthetic experience. As noted earlier, the human experience has been for eons a mixture of real and synthetic events. According to Goffman (7), even in the simplest acts of presenting themselves to others, people do a little synthesizing to improve the picture they want others to receive. Through the mass media, synthetic events have become more pervasive in modern life, and—the point we wish to emphasize—increasingly these synthetic events have been presented to audiences in the form of synthetic experience. However, through the mass media, synthetic events have

become both more pervasive and more insinuatingly salient in modern life. . . .

For example, one's impressions of flowers may come from a flower garden in one's yard—an extended series of manifold real events and experiences. Alternatively, one may visit a "flower show," a synthetic event typically staged by commercial interests to stimulate business. A flower show provides a real experience of the pleasures of flowers but minimal experience of the effort and patience they can demand. In the spring, local television news may present a 30-second essay on local flowers in bloom, cutting from one garden or yard to the next in 10-mile leaps to show a variety of flowers at the peak of beauty over a period of weeks, with appropriately floral background music (e.g., "June is Busting Out All Over"). . . . At the same time, seed companies may present TV ads targeted to would-be gardeners. One such ad featured edited, stop-frame photography depicting flowers bursting from sprout to blossom in colorful "explosions" resembling fireworks, synchronized with music from the 1812 Overture. Staged and produced to maximize persuasive impact, such an ad offers perceptions of flowers based on synthetic events and synthetic experience (compared to which the petunias in one's window box seem decidedly subdued). . . .

. . . [W]hether a particular experience is perceived as real or synthetic depends a great deal on the person experiencing it. . . . However, . . . much of our present-day experience is completely different from that existing prior to the twentieth century. . . . In common with people of past ages, we still have real experiences of both real and synthetic events. But, unprecedentedly in history, a considerable portion of our sensory input now comprises . . . synthetic experiences of real and synthetic events. . . .

A number of hypotheses link the growing prevalence of synthetic experience with tendencies apparent in contemporary American life. Five are described here:

1. *Low tolerance for boredom or inactivity.* With so much of our experience now designed explicitly to engage our interest and/or to attract our entertainment dollar, we probably have become used to a heightened sense of excitement and activity. Both staged synthetic events and real events (for example, the news) are communicated to us as synthetic experience, more interesting for most people than viewing events as real experiences. Indeed, what would be the point of using electronic razzle-dazzle if doing so did not attract audience attention and enhance audience interest (11, p. 171)? It should be possible to document a cultural shift toward increased excitement-seeking that parallels the growth of electronic media.
2. *Heightened expectations of perfection and of high-level performance.* As more human experience finds its source in professionally produced offer-

ings of the sight/sound media, more of our perceptions involve individuals who have been specially selected for their superior appearance, presence, and ability to do whatever it is they are doing. Normally only television's very best takes are shown to audiences. Hours of tape are shot to produce a single 30-second commercial.

The result is that a very high proportion of what we see is far smoother, more expert, and more polished than would be possible for anyone to experience as an on-the-spot observer, even of a professional performance. It is not at all surprising that children entering grammar school after spending several years watching "Sesame Street" are often well prepared for letters and numbers but not for spending the day with a real-life teacher. Many expect more expertise, slickness, and stimulation than these teachers can deliver. As Postman (15, p. 143) puts it: "We know now that 'Sesame Street' encourages children to love school only if school is like 'Sesame Street.' Which is to say, we know now that 'Sesame Street' undermines what the traditional idea of schooling represents."

The danger of unrealistic expectations is that lack of fulfillment can lead to disappointment, frustration, and dissatisfaction. How much of current social discontent may be attributable to inflated expectations fostered by commercial media images presented as synthetic experience? With television's "beautiful people" a ubiquitous comparison, how many can remain easily content with the mundane people, events, and possessions that constitute their lots in life?

3. *Expectations of quick, effective, neat resolutions of problems.* Drama, sports events, and entertainment of all kinds presented on television are compactly packaged and neatly tied up. A problem is posed, and within a short space of real time (usually a half-hour or an hour) it is resolved. Commercials typically dramatize quick and complete solutions to whatever problem the product is claimed to solve. Processes that in reality require hours, days, weeks, or even years are telescoped down to seconds. By contrast, real-life problems tend to be complex, unresolved, and ongoing. But as more of their perceptions originate in synthetic experiences of synthetic events, television audiences may find themselves increasingly frustrated and dissatisfied with the slow and incomplete solutions allowed by real life to the messy problems it poses. It may not stretch the point too far to suggest that some roots of our intensifying litigiousness (a uniquely American proclivity) may be found in this aspect of our communication environment.
4. *Misperceptions of certain classes of physical and social events.* Relatively few people personally witness during their lifetimes a serious automobile collision, a determined fistfight between adults, or a homicide.

But the typical American television viewer or regular moviegoer is exposed to a host of these every week, staged as synthetic events and delivered as synthetic experience, replete with slow motion and the excerpting out of actual pain, gore, and aftermath. Repeated exposure to these and similar depictions may tend to desensitize a viewer's natural, human reactions to what are in real life genuinely traumatic situations. An uncritical viewer also might come to perceive, for example, that slow-motion violence doesn't hurt, that crime usually involves clean, articulate people in well-defined situations, that police are hardly gun-shy, and so forth.

5. *Limited contact with, and a superficial view of, one's own inhabited environment.* Until the twentieth century the vast majority of people never traveled great distances, and so their only experience of the world at large was at best vicarious knowledge gained from verbal reports, stories, myths, rumors or artistic illustrations. On the other hand, they knew their immediate world intimately. Today the sight/sound media provide an easily accessed window to the outside world. But media depictions of "everyday life," plus the opportunity the media provide for avoiding involvement with it, leave us less in touch with the actualities of our own physical and social world compared to people of bygone times. We may have a far broader picture of the world than did our forebears. But our wider range of "facts" and perceptions may be largely false or distorted (see, e.g., 6, p. 179) because of our own predilection for synthetic events electronically presented as synthetic experience. This, coupled with a concomitantly impaired understanding and appreciation of our own immediate milieu, may leave us on balance more ignorant of reality than were citizens of pre-electronic ages. . . .

. . . [E]mpirical evidence on how manipulations of depicted processes affect audiences is still scarce. Indeed, this research area poses some daunting methodological challenges. . . . Research also has been hindered by a paucity of conceptual frameworks that lead to theoretical models, testable hypotheses, and measurable variables. . . . However, . . . we can hardly afford to disregard useful insights into important problems merely because they do not meet impossibly strict methodological criteria. Greater cross-validation of findings and more thorough mutual monitoring among scholars (3) would be appropriate strategies in studying the social effects of synthetic experience.

Empirical research on agenda-setting—the notion that mass media, by selection and emphasis of content pertaining to specific issues or topics, can cause changes in the importance the audience accords those issues or topics—has generally focused on some combination of three variables: system-

atic variations in mass media content, variations in the flow of events being reported by the mass media, and changes in public opinion (see, e.g., 5, 9, 17). We suggest the term "micro agenda-setting" for this ability of mass media, through emphasis on content, to influence public perceptions of the relative importances of specific issues.

The potential of electronic media to color, distort, and perhaps even degrade an entire cultural world view, by presenting images of the world suited to the agenda of the media (in the U.S. case, commercial interests), we might term "macro agenda-setting." This process involves analogous variables: systematic deviations of media depictions from observable, everyday reality; actual characteristics of everyday reality; and changes in public perceptions of physical and social reality. We suggest that the distinctions proposed here between real and synthetic events, and between real and synthetic experience, may provide a fruitful framework for the study of macro agenda-setting.

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